

Medicine in Shrivenham

By Neil B. Maw



The earliest documentary evidence that we have for any medical practitioner in Shrivenham, comes from the Memoires of Augusta Barrington. (Published by SHS 2020 p.47). She referred to, *'Dr Mantell, the old family physician.'* Attending the awful train crash at Shrivenham Station in 1848 was also a Dr Mantell (Morning Herald newspaper 12th May 1848). The census for Shrivenham in 1851 listed, Henry Axford Mantell, G.P. and that he was from Faringdon. The newspaper article mentioned above, also described him as from Faringdon. However, the same census also listed Dr Charles Gunning Parker who was described later as a veterinary surgeon (Berks Chronicle 29th Nov 1862). The same newspaper also printed a letter from Dr Parker that he wrote from, *'Normanby Cottage.'* (Above). He was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, and had been in general practise in London. He was 40 years of age and with him was his wife Ann. He was involved in developing a vaccine for Smallpox which had taken a terrible toll among humans for a long time. In the letter mentioned above, Dr Parker explained how he had vaccinated sheep and placed them among other flocks that had raging smallpox, with very good results. His wife Ann died in 1870 and was buried in St Andrew's churchyard on 19th May 1870, aged 55. Six years later Dr Parker re-married a lady called Eliza, who was the widow of Thomas Coakley. (Berks Chronicle 15th April 1876). But she too passed away at Normanby Cottage three years later. (Berks Chron 6th December 1879). In general, Charles Parker was a well-respected doctor and member of the community, but at

times he did face criticism. When a young Shrivenham boy was seriously injured whilst larking about on machinery, he was placed under the care of Dr Parker. As the newspaper reported, *'For the space of eighteen days the poor child lay in a wretched, dirty state, upon a bed of old coats and a blanket.'* He subsequently died and at the inquest held at the Barrington Arms, Dr Parker was censured for, *'allowing the child to lie in a state of filth.'* (Western Daily press 29th December 1877). And a few years later, after an accident whereby a 9year-old boy called Percy Tovey had broken an arm falling out of a tree, the lad unfortunately died. At the inquest held at the Victoria Inn, Shrivenham Station, the jury returned a verdict of, *'Accidentally killed by a fall from a tree,'* to which the rider was added, *'the jury are unanimously of opinion that the conduct of the surgeon in this matter is decidedly reprehensible and regret that he did not pay such attention as the case demanded.'* Upon hearing the verdict with the rider, the reporter for the newspaper added that he, the surgeon, *'made use of an expression unbecoming a man in his position and anything but complimentary to the jury.'* Dr Parker died at Normanby Cottage on 6th April 1887 aged 76. His funeral was covered in quite a large article in which it stated he had been at Shrivenham for nearly 40 years and was a man who had spent, *'a useful public life.'*

The next occupant of Normanby Cottage was also a medical man, a General Practitioner by the name of George Eccles Priestley Nixon, who was born in Dublin, Ireland. News of his appointment had been announced in the newspaper back in 1881 when it stated that he had been appointed, *'medical officer and public vaccinator for the Shrivenham district of the Faringdon Union.'* (Dublin Daily Express 18th August 1881). The union being the multitude of villages that surrounded Faringdon, that decided upon medical aid to local people and entry into the workhouse. It's not certain where he resided, but it's likely that when Normanby Cottage became available after the death of Charles Parker, George Nixon took on the lease. He was also listed as the occupier on the 1891 census. We are not certain when George Nixon vacated the house but by the 1901 census Albert Persee Macnamara was resident, another medical practitioner, also from Ireland. (See photo below & SHS Listing N983 for more information).

Qualified medical doctors at that time, seemed to work from home. They could be called upon at any time of the day or night and quite frequently were. Albert Macnamara featured in numerous newspaper articles where he attended accidents and medical emergencies. He

was also fond of music and not only attended but joined in many of the village social gatherings.



Normanby House being part of the Beckett Estate, was included in the estate sale of 1922. It was sold by private treaty before the auction date but we have no confirmation of who bought it. Perhaps it was the resident tenant Dr Albert Macnamara. The documents belonging to Dr Tony and Diana Crockett, current owners of Elm Tree House, Shrivenham, show that Dr Macnamara had purchased their house in 1925. This event would be the very beginnings of what is today, Elm Tree Surgery.

Although there is no documentation that will explain exactly how the practice was started, general information has been passed down verbally over the years. Apparently, it was a somewhat ramshackle set up at the beginning with operations being performed in what is the kitchen today in Elm Tree House, and there was likely a waiting room for patients. Dr Mac, as he became known, was one of the first in the village to have a motor car. He also had a 'motor-man' to look after it. During the First World War, his man called Edwin Titcombe was exempted from being called up for military service because of his usefulness to Dr Mac. (Faringdon Adver 3rd March 1917). Dr Mac died on 21st October 1944, and he was interred in St Andrew's churchyard, in the ground on the left of the Lytch Gate.

The executors of the estate of Dr Mac sold Elm Tree House (below) and his medical practice to Dr Ernest Algernon Sparks the following year. In 1947 he placed an advertisement in the

newspaper with precise requirements as to what he was looking for, *'Mother and Daughter or 2 friends for plain cooking and housework.'* And curiously it only seemed to have been placed in the Belfast News-Letter dated 15th April 1947. He advertised again in 1955 for domestic help and that time it appeared only in the Cornish Guardian for 28th April. The Electoral Register for Shrivvenham for 1958-9 listed Ernest Algernon Sparkes and Vivienne Sparkes, presumably his wife. He had a practice partner in the person of Dr Peter Frank Anthony Watkins (who preferred to be called Tony) who lived at the house called The Grange at Watchfield. Historically the property was known as Beckett Home Farm and formed part of the Barrington Estate. It was sold in 1928 (See SHS N2557). The circumstances of Dr Sparkes leaving is not clear, but from the documents associated with Elm Tree House, Dr (Derek) Barry Dumughn and Dr. Margaret Dumughn purchased it in 1965 and formed what would become Elm Tree Surgery. At nearby Watchfield, Dr Tony Watkins continued to run his practice there until 1973 when he moved to Devon to semi-retire to continue his studies into skin diseases and partake of his love of fishing. On his departure the Watchfield surgery was closed. His place was taken by Dr John Clements (See SHS listing N1412 for 'Memories of a new GP in the 1970s'). Around 1979 Barry Dumughn went to work in Saudi Arabia, and Dr Sheila Lee was brought in to fill the gap but ended up staying until the early 1990s.



The nearby military college had its own medical officers but in the mid 1980s they requested that the Elm Tree practice might provide medical services. The increase in workload and an expanding village population meant that another doctor was needed in the person of Dr Anthony Crockett, who became the third partner in 1987. All the partners were involved in

medical education in various ways. By that time GP training had become formalised and required that each qualified doctor undertake a trainee year under the supervision of an experienced doctor in practice. Dr Margaret Andrews joined the practice as a Trainee under Tony Crockett in September 1991. Leaving a year later, Margaret Andrews was replaced by Trainee Richard Fisher, but she returned in 1994 as a partner. It was at that time the practice continued to expand by purchasing the Hayloft over what was historically the Stables of Elm Tree House. The space was converted into meeting rooms and offices.

In 1995 Barry Dumughn and his wife 'Marney' decided to retire and sold Elm Tree House to Dr Tony Crockett and his wife Diana who are the current occupiers and owners of the property (2021). In the medical practice, Dr Richard Fisher became a partner, and by 2006 several changes took place. John Clements decided to retire and Sian Edwards who had been a Trainee under Tony Crockett became a part-time, salaried doctor. Other changes took place with doctors changing their work patterns from full-time to part-time.

It should also be noted that nurses were a valuable resource at the practice. Sarah Clements the wife of Dr John Clements was a very popular and respected nurse, who sadly became ill and passed away all too soon. Other nurses included Glenys Talbot and Caroline Cooper. More recent doctors are Francis Campbell, Abby Downing and Laura Smith.

A large building development to the north of the village began in 2018, and when completed, approximately 600 new houses will be added and swell the population of Shrivenham even further. The Elm Tree Surgery will undoubtedly expand to meet that demand and continue to be the '*Medicine in Shrivenham.*'



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